Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion With Students on Violence in Schools at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia

April 22, 1999

The President. Thank you, Mr. Porter. I think all of you know that we are being joined by several million students through various media outlets that are covering this, and so let me begin by saying I'm delighted to be here at T.C. Williams High School. Thank you, Mr. Porter. Our superintendent, Herb Berg, is here, and I'm glad to be back in this school district again that has hosted me for so many important educational announcements.

Senator Robb and Congressman Jim Moran are both here with us, along with Mayor Kerry Donley. I thank them for joining us, and our two teachers, Ellen Harmon and Barbara Finney.

I want to spend most of my time today listening to you. I have a few questions I want to ask, and I'm going to turn it over to the teachers as soon as I make a few opening remarks. But I got up this morning, and I made some notes and worked over them again, and I'd like to say just a few things.

First of all, we're here, obviously, because of the terrible tragedy in Littleton, Colorado, and because, even though it is the worst example of school violence we've seen, it is by no means the only one. And indeed, I think that some of the people joining us today are from Paducah, Kentucky, and Jonesboro, Arkansas—at least those two communities which had examples of school violence last year.

I think it's important that all over America students and teachers have a chance to discuss their feelings about this, their ideas about what we should do, and it's especially important for younger children, who might be quite traumatized and wonder whether they are, in fact, safe at school. So I want to talk a little about all of that.

There is really nothing more important than keeping our schools safe. And we've tried to do a lot of things in that regard over the last few years, having a zero tolerance for guns and drugs policy, putting new community police officers in schools where they're needed, trying to support more counselors in schools, more after-school, more mentoring programs, more conflict resolution programs. We've tried to help school districts and students and teachers, who wanted to do it, to have—for younger children, elementary and junior high school—using school uniform policies or dress code policies where they wanted to implement those things. But we know that there are things which have to be done sort of beyond the Government and beyond anything Government can do.

I spent a lot of time thinking about this, but I want to say, last night and today I thought about the work that my wife has done on this for many years, and I went back and reread the chapters in her book that deal with the problems that children have in coping with violence and the responsibilities of parents and the larger society. I thought about the work that the Vice President's wife, Tipper Gore, started doing well over a decade ago on this whole issue. And I think we have to ask ourselves some pretty hard questions here. What are the responsibilities of students themselves? What are the responsibilities of schools? What are the responsibilities of parents? What is the role of the larger culture here? Is there a sense in which the fact that all of you are exposed to much higher levels of violence through television, through video games, that you can actually figure out how to make bombs on the Internet—does that make a difference? Does it make these kinds of things more likely to happen? What are our responsibilities?

But before I open it to you, I'd just like to make one other comment. I think, particularly for young people who may be quite frightened as a result of this, or for parents who may wonder about the safety of schools, I think it's worth restating two or three basic things.

First of all, on balance, our schools are still the safest place our kids can be in most communities under most or all circumstances.

Secondly, I think it's worth reminding everyone that in spite of these horrible instances, our country is still fundamentally a good and decent place, and our people are good and decent people. And we have seen

the way the community of Littleton responded to this: people standing in line for hours to give blood, people showing up to volunteer their services as counselors and in other ways, with the way people have reached out to each other. We see a kind of microcosm of how America has reacted to this.

And I think it's important that the young people of our country know this and that the parents know this, that they should remember we—as horrible as this is, we have seen once again what is basically decent and good about America. And we should remember that most schools are more nearly represented by the kind of conversation we're having around here today than by the horrible incident we saw in Colorado.

So I think that's enough for me to say. But I'm interested in what you think about it, what your reactions are, what you've done here to try to avoid this, and what you think the responsibilities of the rest of us are, starting at home and going all the way up to the President, and also the cultural issues I mentioned.

You know, we have to acknowledge, as Hillary does in this book—and I went back and read some of the things we talked about over the last 20 years—that we do have more violence among younger people in America than other cultures do. And everyone has to take a hard look at what all the elements of our society are that contribute to that and what we can do to diminish it.

I also would like to say—let me just mention one other thing. I think it's important because of the action in which we're involved in Kosovo today. We don't know all the facts about what happened in Littleton, but one of the things that's come out of this that's really made an impression on me is that the young men who were involved in this horrible act apparently felt that they were subject to ridicule and ostracism, and they were kind of social outcasts at the school. But their reaction to it was to find someone else to look down on. And apparently, they were very prejudiced against African-Americans and Hispanics, and observed Adolf Hitler's birthday, and otherwise reacted to that.

This is something that you see a lot around the world and throughout human history, that people who themselves feel disrespected, instead of developing an enormous sympathy for other people who have been subject to discrimination, instead look for someone else to look down on so they can always say, ''Well, I may be dissed at school, or I may be subject to disrespect in some other environment, but at least I'm not them.''

And I think that's a larger problem we really have to fight, because you look around this room—of course, we're in perhaps the most diverse school district in America today—but this is a great opportunity for us, as long as we lift other people up and recognize the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals and all ethnic, religious, and cultural groups.

And so I think that's another point that needs to be made here: They had the wrong reaction to the fact that they were dissed. Hey, look, everybody gets dissed sometime in life, even the President—[*laughter*]—sometimes, especially the President.

So these are some of the things that I was thinking about that I hope will spark your thoughts. And I think I'll turn it back to you and to the teachers to discuss this in any way you'd like.

[*Ellen Harmon, a teacher at T.C. Williams, opened the floor to the students for discussion.*]

The President. Yes, pass the mike.

[*Teacher Barbara Finney stated that she had a group of mediators at the school and introduced one. A veteran student mediator stated that the mediation program helped a lot of students and believed tragedy in Littleton grew out of a build up of anger or aggression that really should have been let out. Another student mediator described the mediation and conflict resolution process at T.C. Williams.*]

The President. I wanted to ask this question, because I honestly believe that young people can help each other, particularly at this age, maybe more than adults can, maybe in some cases more than their parents can, if things get out of hand.

But what I want to ask you is, how do they get there, if they're really angry? What if they're too embarrassed about what they

think is being done to them to talk about it? Do they get there only when they come to you, or do other kids say, ''Hey, these two people are having trouble,'' or ''these two groups are having trouble. You need to go to them.'' Can you all talk to me about that?

[*A participant said students may be referred to mediation or could approach the teacher in charge confidentially. She said the situation in Littleton, CO, appeared to have resulted from the build up of anger, and part of the process at T.C. Williams was to let the students vent their anger, which helped resolve the problem.*]

The President. Go ahead.

[*A student said the school had instituted a confidential safety hotline so students could reach the peer mediation people in the school and indicated that if something similar had been available in Littleton, the problem may have been prevented.*]

The President. So you're saying if they had a hotline, as opposed to a peer mediation group, then someone who was afraid——

Student. No, they work together—they work together.

The President. That's what I mean. In addition to. So, if someone were afraid, they could call the hotline and say, ''Here's what I think is going on.''

Student. Yes. And it's confidential, you just——

The President. Okay. Suppose I call the hotline and say, ''Listen, I just talked to one of these people, and they're talking about getting guns and shooting people.'' Then what happens? I called the hotline, here. What happens?

Student. Peer mediation can be contacted with that, because you have given us a name, or Mr. Porter can talk to them or something.

The President. I think this is good. That's wonderful.

Okay.

[*A student, who is a peer mediator, said that classmates participating in mediation were able to speak openly without fear of punishment or judgment and that this allowed more openness, giving the students a broader perspective. Another student noted that perhaps part of the problem in Littleton was its school's lack of diversity as opposed to T.C. Williams which has so many different social, racial, and national groups that no one is left out. A third student stated that the administration and teachers at T.C. Williams did an excellent job resolving problems before they emerge.*]

The President. First of all, I think that's a very brave thing for you to say. But there's no doubt that those people are very good people, that they have a good school, that they thought things were rocking along—which is why—that's why what you said, I think, is very important, that there needs to be some organized outlet that people can access privately. Because nearly everybody in America believes this couldn't happen in their school. So I think having this way to call and say, this is going on—we all need warning systems.

Go ahead.

Student. But, see, the problem is—what I feel is, I feel the administrators knew about this because a lot of people say, like, on the news and stuff, the students seemed to know about this crew already and seemed to not have done nothing about it. They didn't bother to prevent it, because they had a page in the yearbook for this crew and everything already.

The President. Yes, but the point I'm trying to make is that—a lot of people seemed to have known in general, but most people didn't—a lot of the people who knew, I think, didn't know that they might do what they did. And that's why it's important to feed all this stuff in someplace, because there are people who do know that—let me come back to the beginning here. I'd like for you all to talk about this.

Let me just say what I was going to say. One of the things that all kids are taught by their parents, you know, is this old ''sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.'' That ain't true—if you'll let me use bad grammar. [*Laughter*] That's not true, because a lot of this stuff starts with words, you know?

And even in what I do and the people I deal with, it's amazing how much energy is lost and how many things are not done for America because people in Washington, DC, at the highest levels of power and influence,

get hurt by what other people say about them—mean, bad things other people say about them. And then they get in the position where they try to bait each other to say mean, bad things, you know.

And I think that somehow, maybe we all—particularly in a culture that desensitizes people to violence, if they're profoundly alienated; and I still think that's a big part of this—all of us have to do a better job of teaching young people not to let themselves be defined by the words other people use against them.

That's something that really struck me when I read these accounts, is how alienated these young people were because these athletes were saying bad things about them or who else was saying bad things about them. They were different. So then, they had to look for somebody to feel bad about.

And that's why I like this peer mediation thing, because it tends to take the sting out of words at the earliest possible time. But people really still get hurt so badly by what is said about them. And somehow, we've got to make people more immune to that.

Go ahead.

[*A student noted the two students in Littleton had bombs, which they may have learned to make with information from the Internet. He asked what the Government was going to do to prevent the dissemination of this information.*]

The President. You know, when the bomb blew up in Oklahoma City and the Federal building was destroyed and all those people were killed, we pointed out that the way the Internet is going with these webpages, people can learn how to build bombs like that on the Internet. And there is a limit to how much we can control it. And we're looking for ways to try to at least help parents deal with what their children can get off the Internet, and a way to use ordinary law enforcement tactics effectively against people who are trying to do illegal things over the Internet. But it's very difficult.

I mean, one of the things that's wonderful about the Internet is kind of its capacity for infinite expansion. And that's one of the great things about it. I don't know how many teachers here now get research papers where all the sources are off the Internet. But it's great. That's the good news. The bad news is it's almost impossible to find this stuff, sort it out, and figure out whether it's illegal or not, and do something about it.

But I agree with you, it's going to be one of the big challenges we face, because there's been a lot of talk about—if you've seen in the last 3 or 4 days—about whether the Internet plus having very young people play very violent video games and where they learn to shoot people and stuff, that those two things have added an extra element to an otherwise already pretty violent culture. And I think we're going to have to take another look at it.

It's not easy. I don't want to pretend that it's easy. If you look at how many thousands and thousands of pages, webpages, are being added to the Internet every day, it's the fastest growing organism in human history for communications. And it presents us a great challenge.

[*A student stated that it would be very hard for the Government to control the information on the Internet in a society with a free press and free speech. He believed the responsibility rested with parents and teachers to monitor what children access on the Internet.*]

The President. Well, I do think it's important that in all these discussions, we not take the focus away from the home. I agree with that. If you look at all the facts that we know from the incidents that happened last year—all the school violence incidents—it appears that there were some cases in which the parents were—to go back to what you said about how other kids knew and they didn't call in—there appears that there were some cases in which the parents knew that the kid had a problem, including an obsession with guns and bombs, and there were other cases where they didn't know and might not have been able to know. But I do think that we shouldn't minimize that.

The only thing I want to—to go back to what you said about the Internet—I agree with that. You don't want me to choke off the Internet. It's one of the greatest things that ever happened. But we've got to figure out a way to apply the ordinary restrictions

of the criminal law in that context, just like you would any other. I think that's all you're saying, is we need to—if somebody's doing something illegal there, we should. But the problem is, how do you—how do parents limit their children's access to something they shouldn't be able to see? And I do think that the role of the Internet, and the way it's bringing everything into the home, has made a parent's job much more difficult. And it's harder to know what to do and how to do it. It's much, much harder. And I think we ought to just fess up to that.

But I'm sympathetic with you. We don't want to destroy what's great about the Internet. It's revolutionizing the American economy. It's opening up opportunities for people, opening up educational opportunities, bringing whole libraries to homes of people who could never afford them. I mean, it's doing a lot of good. But we've got to figure out a way to deal with these downside risks.

[*A student stated that it appeared administrators and students in Littleton knew there was a problem, and thought administrators should have contacted the parents. Ms. Finney said she heard another Littleton student say on the news that he heard the suspects planning the attack last year and she believed he should have taken the initiative to tell someone.*]

The President. I want to hear from the students, but that goes back to what you said. What I would like to—the message to go out across all the millions of students like you that are listening, and all of the schools, is that no matter how good your school is and no matter how good your programs are, we need a little humility here. And you're not doing something bad if you hear people talking about doing something or you see them becoming profoundly alienated in ways that could be destructive, if you tell someone who's in a position of responsibility to do something about it. They're not going to be punished if they hadn't done anything wrong, but we might be able to prevent more of these things.

I do think that one of the lessons that will come out of this incident, no matter what the facts turn out to be, is that there has to be a hotline, there has to be some sort of early warning system; there has to be a climate in which children feel, young people feel that they can ring the alarm bell when they see something like this.

[*Another student introduced herself to the President.*]

The President. Oh, yes, you've been waiting a long time—she's been waiting longer than anybody else. [*Laughter*]

[*The student cited a lack of morality and urged more disciplinary action from school administrators.*]

The President. I agree with that. But what happens if all of that still doesn't work because young people at some point develop a whole other life? I mean, when you look at what is apparently the fact here, these—they created a whole new culture for themselves, a whole other life, which—we don't know the facts yet about what their parents did or didn't know, about what the schools did or didn't know. I think it's important for us not to make hasty judgments about Littleton.

I agree with what you say. But I also think in addition to what you say, we've got to have some warning system to protect everybody else.

Go ahead.

[*A student expressed his disagreement with the news media placing blame on movies and video games and said people should be spending more time with their children. Another participant said discipline should start at an early age, not in the teen years. Another student pointed out that blame often falls on high-crime areas but that Littleton is a white suburban area. She asked if this would take the focus off of racial groups being the cause of the problems.*]

The President. Well, I hope so. You know, it's interesting; all of these instances of school violence, even though they occurred in schools which some had a lot of racial diversity, some had not much racial diversity, but they all occurred away from inner-city areas with very high unemployment and high general crime rates. They tended to occur more in small towns and rural areas or suburbs,

where you normally would not think that society itself falling apart around you would happen.

Now, part of that could be the absence of the kind of warning and alert systems that you often have in the big city schools. I mean, a lot of big city schools, for example, all routinely have metal detectors and things like that because they know they've got to protect their kids. But I think what it means is that whatever is out there in our culture, whether it is the failure of parents to teach their kids, whether it is that plus then the extra exposure to violent experiences when you're young, kind of one step removed through media or video games or whatever, whatever it is—what it shows is that the people in rural America and in suburban America, in low-crime America and upper income America are just as vulnerable to having alienated young people in gangs or in isolation take violent action. I think that's what it shows. And it should destroy any of our racial or economic stereotypes about this. This is something that can happen anywhere. That's the point you made, and I think that's right.

[*A student stated having the hotline and peer mediators was great but noted that T.C. Williams also had social workers and psychologists, which offered students choices. He asked how many of the other schools in the country had these alternatives.*]

The President. Well, the truth is that some do, and some don't. More and more, I think, schools are doing that. Some have economic constraints. Some may not think they need them. But I believe that—I can tell you this. One of the things I have tried to do is to make it possible for schools to have more trained personnel and more options to serve children that have a whole variety of different needs.

And I suspect that one positive thing that will come out of this awful incident is that schools all over America today will be doing an inventory of what kinds of supports they have for their children. And they will—I expect, just because we're doing this, your principal and your teachers will be flooded with inquiries over the next 2 weeks about what you have done here, about the peer mediation thing, about what kind of social workers you have, what kind of psychologist do you have, what kind of support do you have, because I think we will see everybody taking a serious look at this.

I'm glad you made that point, though, because there are people who have genuine emotional problems that require more professional, intense, longer term help than even the peer mediators can provide. So I think that's an important point you make.

[*A student stated that other schools should have the alternatives offered at T.C. Williams so these things don't happen again and then asked the President when he or the Government was going to take immediate action for the other students in the country.*]

The President. Well, first of all, you should know that we have provided, already, funds—last year—for a lot of these services for schools. And the Attorney General and the Secretary of Education put out a booklet that basically cited the best practices in all the schools.

We don't—the Federal Government doesn't run this high school. You know, you have a local school board, and most of the money comes from the State. We give some money, so—but what we did, we sent out a handbook, which basically had the best practices, for early warning signals, for preventive programs, for the kinds of things that you do here. And we've provided a lot of support to help schools to have the services they need to make them more safe.

Now, in the next few days I'm going to send another piece of legislation up to the Congress to do even more of this. But for it to work, people have to use the resources that are there and implement the systems that are there, and it has to be done in every school in the country.

Let me just say—this is kind of along the lines of your question—when I called the County Commissioner in Littleton, Colorado, the woman who is in charge of the local county government there, she was very, I thought, quite brave, considering it was in the middle of this crisis. The school hadn't even been—not all the children had been taken out yet. And she said, ''Well, if this can happen here, it can happen anywhere, and maybe, finally, every school in America

will do what is necessary to try to prevent this.''

So we have—last year we had the first White House conference in history on school safety. We have sent things to every school in America, and we have—and I said, I'm going to send another bill this week, or in the next few days, to do more. But it has to—every school has to realize that if you want to be safe you have to be prepared, just like you are here.

Yes.

[*A student stated that parents, teachers, government, and students should work together to prevent school violence and provide for the common welfare of the community. Another student said students are often more in tune with other students and that having the opportunity to be an anonymous source of information, as was the case with the T.C. Williams hotline, was very important. Another student said the racism should stop, and everyone should feel they were part of a group. Another student stated that there were no guarantees against future violence and high school students all over America need to be more sensitive and considerate of one another, which would help eliminate animosity.*]

The President. I must say, these things you say to me are among the most impressive things of all, because all of us want to be part of groups, and we are part of groups whether we like it or not. We're all part of groups. You know, we just—from the families we're born in and the lives we live. And the trick is to convince people that it's good to be part of a group, a racial, an ethnic, a religious, a cultural group, to be an athlete, to be a scholar, to be into music, to be into whatever. But it's not—it doesn't have to be negative when compared with someone else. That's the thing that breaks your heart.

And also, it's very important—another reason I like this hotline and I like what you said is that it's very hard to be 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 years old; and if you are very lonely and very alienated and you feel you don't belong with anybody or anything, and then all of a sudden, one or two other people come along, and they're just like you, and then you find something on the Internet that you can read that you can relate to, and then things begin to spin out of control. And I think what you said about reaching out to people who seem to be alone and have nobody to care about them. I think that's very, very important as well.

I think that you know it a lot better than I do. But as old as I am, I can still remember, it was—I had some pretty tough times when I was 13, 14, 15, 16 years old, and I had a very fortunate life. You realize how hard you have to work to keep from getting into patterns that will be destructive throughout life where people feel that they only count when they're in a group, that then they're opposed to somebody else, they can look down on somebody else. It is the curse of human society throughout the world.

Go ahead. You two, and then—this young man hasn't spoken yet, but go ahead. We'll get you the mike as soon as he is finished. Who wants to go next? Go ahead.

[*A student said young people were more desensitized than they were 20 years ago and that the media needs to take some responsibility. She cited the popularity of violent movies as an example. She also stated that the value of human life had declined and that some of these violent students may not have understood the impact of what they had done.*]

The President. Yes. Let me say this: I really respect all of you very much to have said that this is a matter of personal responsibility, family responsibility, and you don't want to blame the culture. I respect you for saying that—I don't want to blame the movies or blame the video games; what you've said and how you've talked with your mother and everything.

But I think you have to recognize—let me just say, for example, when I was your age, if anything, the racism was more pronounced, the social hierarchies in the schools were dramatic—between those who were in and those who were out—people fought regularly on the school grounds, and they were vicious to each other and—but you didn't have as much gun violence.

And I think it is unquestionable that more people have more access to more weapons, and more people at an earlier age can move

from profound alienation and misery into using violence against other than was the case 20 or 30 years ago, because they either have—they have more opportunities and because they've been desensitized and maybe because they don't have a chance to sit down with a mother or a father the way you do every night.

So the only thing I'm saying is, I think it's important not to oversimplify this. And I hate it when people blame someone else and don't take responsibility for what they did, but I don't think we can be blind to the fact that there are more opportunities and there is a greater openness to taking violent action on the part of alienated people today than there was 20 or 30 years ago.

And I think the experience that these children have before, maybe—maybe even when they're very young, before they form proper barriers in life about what's right, what's wrong, what can or can't be done, makes them quite vulnerable.

Go ahead. Who was next? This young man.

[*A student expressed his concern for people who were into Gothic culture and rock music because he feared they would take the blame for instigating the situation in Littleton. He also expressed concern about being able to say things in school when angry, because when angry, people say things they would not otherwise say.*]

The President. So how do you think we should deal with that?

[*The student said that people should be more careful about what they say when they are angry, that there were healthier ways to deal with anger. He said the school provided counselors and psychologists for students to talk to when angry, but he was able to discuss his problems at home with his family.*]

The President. Good for you. Let me say, just generally, I don't think—if all of you who have participated in this conflict resolution thing—maybe you've seen enough of this in other students to know this—but I can tell you from having lived a lot more years, this is a big problem later in life, too. Sometimes it's a bigger problem for men than for women because of the cultural sort of preconceptions of our society.

If you don't learn to talk about your feelings when you're young, and you don't have a constructive outlet for it, it just gets harder and harder and harder as you get older. And we're talking today about avoiding terrible tragedy. But we ought to talk just a minute about having a good life. You know, most people won't do anything really terrible, and most people will have some sort of life, but if you want to have a good life, you have to have some constructive outlet for your feelings.

And that's one thing that I really like about this whole way we're talking today. And I hope that it's something that will go out across the country and will change the way young people just live their lives. And I hope it's something you can take out of high school, because you'd be amazed how many people my age, in very responsible positions, still can't manage their anger because they never learned to have a constructive way to talk about it.

So this is not just—I mean, I know we're here to talk about this school violence, and I don't want to get off the subject, but I think that this is a general problem of life. And you have said a very important thing. And I hope that all of you will remember this, that it's not just something for high school. And to avoid having bad things happen, learning to manage your anger and to actually share how you really feel about something and get it behind you is one of the most important aspects of growing up. And you would be amazed how few people can really do it right.

[*A student stated the need to take a look at how easy it was for the two Littleton students to get guns and expressed her belief in the need for regulation of weapons.*]

The President. There is no other country in the world where it is so easy for people to get and misuse weapons. And we have a culture of having a right to own weapons and a right to use them and a big hunting culture, and I grew up in it, participated in it, and enjoyed it very much.

But I have—every little thing I've tried to do, from the passing of the Brady bill to the passing of the assault weapons ban, all these things have met with violent opposition, as

if I were trying to destroy the American way of life. And all I'm trying to do is keep more people alive.

And so I think that we need—we don't have, really, time to talk about this, because I want all of you to talk, but this will be a part of what we are trying to do, to strike a better, proper balance between making it harder for people who are violent to get guns and misuse them, without interfering with the constructive role that it plays in our society.

Go ahead. Oh, I'm sorry.

Ms. Harmon. I was just going to say, we're running a little short on time. Maybe we could take a few more questions. It's up to you.

The President. Yes. Go ahead.

[*A student stated we are one of the most free countries in the world and that the easy answer to a dilemma like Littleton was to restrict freedom or rights—or mandatory uniforms and clear backpacks. He cautioned against raising security levels at the cost of freedom.*]

The President. First, I think that's a point well taken. You mentioned school uniforms, let me tell you the position I took on that. I spent some time in Long Beach, California, which is the third biggest school district in California, which means it's huge. And it's the biggest school district that early introduced the school uniform policy, not applied to high schoolers for obvious reasons. But they did it in part because when the junior high schoolers had uniforms, which were basically just two-color outfits they wore every day, it distinguished them from the gangs, which created a safety problem. And it made all the kids safe.

But they found, interestingly enough, that kids from upper income as well as lower income families did better in those very troubling years where you're moving right into your teenage years. And it lowered dropouts; it increased attendance; it reduced discipline problems. It worked fine. What we tried to do was to say if the community decided they wanted to do it, then we would help them. And we've seen it happen a lot.

Now, my only question in this regard, in the order question you asked—and, again, I think it's very important that we not rush to judgment in Littleton. Those people are still grieving. They are still heartbroken. We do not have the facts there. It is very important that none of us make judgments about that now. But we can make judgments about how we want all schools to run.

But one of the things that struck me there was this whole black trenchcoat deal, and whether or not—if the hotline, if they'd had a hotline, and whether or not you had this kind of stuff there—whether the school administrators should have been able to say, ''We're not going to have a school uniform policy, but we'll have a nonprovocative dress code policy.'' Is that too much of an infringement on individual liberty?

We can't answer that question. You've raised a good question. But let me just give you the other side of it. And you have to decide, in every case, whether it's an infringement on liberty or it's like going through a metal detector at an airport. I don't know how many times—before I became President, I was just traveling around like all the rest of us—how many times I went through a metal detector at an airport, and I set it off because of my belt buckle or the money clip in my pants or whatever, so I had to turn around, take it all out, go back in blah blah blah. Well, when all this started, people said, ''Well, is this going to be an infringement on our liberty, right?'' And then people saw planes hijacked and blown up, and they said, ''Please infringe on my liberty a little bit''—[*laughter*]—so that no one felt—I say, nearly no one felt that it was an undue infringement on our liberty.

I'll give you another, maybe, what you think is a harder case, motorcycle helmet laws. You'll say, ''I ought to have a right to split my head open if I want.'' But that's not entirely true, because if I hit you and you split your head open, and you wouldn't have if you'd had your helmet on, then I and society are supporting you, in a way.

So these questions—I am glad you made the point, but the point needs to be debated against the larger—the other large issue of individual freedom versus heading this stuff off. That's all I'm asking. And you might keep little models in your head about the importance of free speech, see, on the one hand,

and the airport metal detector on the other, and then whenever somebody comes up with a specific, argue it within that framework.

[*A student stated that the First Lady knew what she was talking about in saying that it takes a whole village to raise children and that if everyone would just look out for everyone else's children, good things would happen.*]

The President. I agree with that. Thank you. [*Laughter*] I think that's very important, that—one of you asked me what I was going to do. I think that the import of what everybody said, all of you said today, is that we all have responsibilities here. And that all these children are our children, and we all have responsibility.

Who's next?

Ms. Harmon. I'm sorry to have to say this, but the afternoon is drawing to a close here; students do have to move on. And we're delighted——

The President. You guys have got to get on the buses, right?

Ms. Harmon. Yes, coming up anyhow. We're very happy that all the students could participate today, and we're so glad that you shared your thoughts in the candid way that you did. So thank you very much. And especially thank you to President Clinton for coming here and sharing and listening to us as well. We're delighted to have you here.

The President. Let me just say this—I know we've got to sign off—first, you were terrific, and I thank you. I thank you for being honest. I thank you for being forthright. Second, in the next few days, as the agony of the grief fades in Colorado and as the facts tend to come out more, I think—I'm speaking not only to those of you who are here in this room, but the millions of children all across our country who are listening and the teachers and the educators—we are going to be working hard on this. And anyone who has more ideas for us needs to feel free to send them to us at the White House, and send them to the Secretary of Education.

We are working to reach out to the country. We want to do what we can to create more environments like this one and to do everything we can to minimize the chance that anything like this will happen again. And we want to, in the process, reassure the children and the parents of America that overwhelmingly our schools are good, safe places.

Thank you.

NOTE: The roundtable began at 12:45 p.m. in the media center. In his remarks, the President referred to John Porter, principal, T.C. Williams High School; Herb Berg, superintendent, Alexandria City schools; and Mayor Kerry Donley of Alexandria.

Statement on Earth Day

April 22, 1999

Today, the last Earth Day of the 20th century, is an opportunity to celebrate America's achievements in protecting our environment and public health and to dedicate ourselves to meeting the environmental challenges of the new century ahead.

Working together, we have made tremendous progress since the first Earth Day in cleaning our air and water, protecting our communities and children from toxic threats, and preserving our precious lands. Americans have demonstrated time and again that we can safeguard our environment even as we grow our economy. I am proud of all that Vice President Gore and I have done to advance these efforts over the past 6 years.

Today the Vice President announces a national strategy to reduce air pollution and restore pristine skies in our national parks and wilderness areas so future generations can see and enjoy them in all their natural splendor. This is but one effort to leave this a better land for our descendants. I join the Vice President in calling on Congress to approve our lands legacy initiative, dedicating permanent funding so that years from now Americans can continue protecting and restoring the deserts, mountains, coastlands, and plains that are so much a part of our Nation's heritage.

A new century brings new environmental challenges—perhaps the greatest is global warming. There is no clearer reminder that we are, indeed, all members of one global community. Only by acting together—as a nation, and in partnership with other nations—can we avert this common threat. This